

Brazil's Two Africas, or which Africa to find in what Brazil?

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The article investigates the idea of Africa as central to the imagining of the Brazilian nation. It argues that the popular beliefs and the black movement differ significantly in their views of Brazil as well as the images of Africa they each use to explain the place of black people in the New World. Thereby the meaning of both Brazil and Africa are a matter of conflict depending on whether Brazil is seen to be a racial democracy or fraught with structural racism, and whether Africa is a place of famine, civil war and deceases having lost its past glory or in fact a glorious place of proud kings and queen. Each picture of Africa and Brazil connotes different positions for black Brazilians. The picture is further complicated by the Roots Tourism from North America recombining the elements from each to create a place of origin, an Africa in Brazil.

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1. Introduction

Brazil is the country with the largest and most dense population of African descent outside of Africa. The idea of Africa has a subtle presence throughout the country and I will argue that it is central in the imagining of the Brazilian nation (Pinho, 2004; Anderson, 1985). This has been investigated by R. L. Segato who in his article asked 'Where to find Africa in the Nation?' (1998). I will argue that the question is posed incorrectly as there are two ideas of Africa present in Brazil and that the question of 'which Africa?' is at the centre of the racial debate roaring to this day. The question is further complicated as 'the Nation' also should be considered in plural.

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2. Brazil

When talking about the African descendents in Brazil race becomes a central question. Black people and African descent are synonyms and therefore the presence of Africa in Brazil signifies racial relations. The first Africans arrived onboard the slave ships soon after the discovery of Brazil in 1500 AD. Here they became the dominant workforce on the sugarcane plantations that was the primary industry of Brazil. From the start the racial relations was characterized by inequality of power. This inequality has had a long history of being justified by different intellectual paradigms such as religion (Polygenism), positivism (Social Darwinism), genetics (Eugenics) and later the idea that through racial mixture Brazil could gain the best of all races although it was expected to be mostly white (Skidmore, 1974, see also Ribeiro, 2000).

Today if asked the Brazilian population is 50 % black and 50 % white although the picture looks quite different if mulatto and other categories are added. When looking at the statistics it becomes evident that race still matters as an indicator of wealth as white people dominate the rich elite, black people are predominantly poor and living in the Brazilian slums – the favela – and the mulattos inhabit the middle class. This material has made Edward Telles conclude that ‘Brazilian racism intensifies with each successive darker shade of skin colour’ (2004: 222).

Dominant Brazilian thoughts about race today are founded on two main concepts. The first is racial democracy as put forth by Gilberto Freyre in 1933 (1964) and claiming Brazil to be unique due to its harmonious racial relations and wide-spread racial mixture. The promises of a racial democracy has since then many times been deflated (earliest by Fernandes, 1969) but the idea persists among the population. Racial democracy is central to the nation-building process and has more than anything else come to be equalled with Brazil – both externally and internally (Domingues, 2005). The idea of a racial democracy is founded on an egalitarian liberalism claiming that people have the wealth they have deserved through hard work and that success thus is a personal responsibility. Here it co-exists with the other concept which is *embranqueamento* – that is, ‘whitening’.

Whitening was born out of the genetically justified racism claiming that white genes are superior to black ones and thus racial mixture will gradually whiten the Brazilian population. Thereby whitening is intrinsically linked to racial mixture and interracial sex. The idea led the Brazilian government shortly after the Abolition in 1888 to import poor European workers to Brazil with hopes of jobs in the emerging industry

(Skidmore, 1974). Today the idea influences what characteristics are associated with beauty, intelligence and trustworthiness – and thus opportunities for success. The whitening idea has also spurred a range of skin colour categories from the darkest black to the palest white and Sheriff (2001) writes that calling someone lighter than they appear is a sign of cordiality - calling someone darker than they are is an insult. I will argue that whitening is a way to incorporate ‘the black other’ into the white national self (see Sjørsløv, 2004).

Not everybody, however, buy into this racist logic. In Brazil there is a Black Movement fighting against what they see as structural racism and attempting to give young black people pride in their ancestry: This is where Africa becomes relevant. The Black Movement claims that structural discrimination keeps black people on the bottom of society blocking their social mobility (Kier, 2007).

It *is* necessary to give pride back. According to the dominant ideas of racial democracy and whitening, it is easy to conclude that black skin colour is the remains of a genetically inferior race soon to be extinct due to racial mixture. The idea of racial democracy combined with experiences of racism makes it even worse. As a young black Brazilian you are not only inferior and about to disappear, you are also the only one to blame for your failure as racial democracy promises equal opportunities for all regardless of race. Young black people are trapped in the national image of Brazil, and that might be why a growing number looks across the Atlantic for relief and a sense of pride (see also Kier, 2007).

3. Two Africas

Militants in the Brazilian Black Movement opposes the whitening ideology by calling themselves ‘black’ in stead of mulatto or any other of the ca. 150 different colour terms normally used in Brazil. It is not easy to make people identify as ‘black’ due to the stigma I have described above. Nevertheless, the Black Movement does it by relating the term to another Africa than the racially inferior continent of the passive slaves. This means that there are two Africas in Brazil.

The ideas of whitening and racial democracy as well as the subject positions as ‘inferior and about to vanish’ are closely linked to an image of Africa. In this image Africa is like we see it in the news. It is a place of famine, civil war and tropical deceases. The image is portrait by all aid organisations and even in the news Africa is mostly mentioned when the story reinforces the stereotype. Even when positive stories are broadcast it is done as the exception to prove the rule that Africa is a backward

continent cursed with famine, drought, civil war and tropical deceases. This is what I call the stereotypical Africa and it is not a place from which to get a sense of pride as it plays a big part in reinforcing the feeling in young black people that they are inferior. Therefore the Black Movement uses another idea about Africa as homeland and place of origin (Kier, 2007).

This is what I call the myth of Africa. When referring to this myth, reference goes to the Africa before the European colonization. It is the Africa of proud tribal kings, magic and the technological inventions such as the Egyptian and Sudanese Pyramids, metallurgy and irrigation. It is the Africa of music, drums and dancing. This is an Africa to take pride in. It is also the Africa of the religions Candomblé and Umbanda, where the gods are powerful and where their power can be utilized through sacrifices. The subject position inherent in being 'African' includes rhythm, magic and sexuality – it is the possibility of being son of an African king. With this picture of Africa being black is a positive thing and made attractive for your black Brazilians.

The question of religion, however, plays an important part. During my fieldwork among the black Movement in Salvador I talked to many militants who had converted from some version of Christianity to Candomblé, Umbanda or Rastafari. In fact, during my time there a fierce discussion was roaring about whether it was possible to be truly black and Christian at the same time. I encountered many of the same arguments in my interviews. Here the argument was that Christianity was intended to pacify the African slaves and stop them from revolting for better conditions. It was claimed to be a religion of the docile with the only hope that their suffering would be rewarded in the afterlife. It was said to be the white man's religion from Europe, and 'real' black people should find truly African religions that could empower them to fight (see also Weber, 1995).

This is what Candomblé, Umbanda and Rastafari was seen to do. Rastafari might be a religion from the Diaspora but it was black to the core. Umbanda and Candomblé are different names for what is often the same religion. Candomblé promises a direct link to the African past of the myth. Many of the gods are African kings and queens, and certain Candomblé houses are making trips to Nigeria to strengthen the link. There is also the question of empowerment to fight. Here Candomblé is different from Christianity as the worshippers can utilize the power of the gods through sacrifices and possession. In my interviews Candomblé was most often highlighted for the historic role it has played in the resistance against slavery in Brazil. Although hidden beneath Catholicism by renaming the African gods as catholic saints it was considered the true expression of

African ‘black’ spirituality – some even claimed it to be in their blood (for more on Candomblé see Sjørnslev, 1995 and Jensen, 2002).

What is considered as ‘in the blood’ and part of an African essence in the Black Movement is considered satanic and dangerous in popular catholic beliefs. It has been stated that one of the reasons why so few Brazilians take up the course of the black movement is its devotion to African religion (Burdick, 1992). A white Brazilian told me that she was afraid to even see a Candomblé ritual as she had been told she would be inclined to get possessed by the goddess of the sea, Yemanjá. When planning to go to a concert at the Black Movement organisation and Carnival band Ilé Aiyé friends told me they were afraid as the groups was rumoured to worship the devil.

There are two aspects to be considered here. One is that the Candomblé god opening the rituals, Exú, has many characteristics in common with the devil. He is short, red, has horns and carries a large fork. He also stands outside most rituals stained with sacrificial blood. The next is that Candomblé is a religion of actions. Where the Christian God will do nothing for you unless you believe in him, Candomblé gods act on your actions regardless of your beliefs. If you sacrifice the god will help you. As I experienced at one such ritual, bystanders can occasionally get drawn into the ritual be being possessed by the gods regardless of the former affiliation. It happened to a guy standing next to me.

Black Movement affiliation and their myth of Africa is often encountered through Candomblé or music. As the dominant picture is that of Brazil as a racial democracy and the stereotypical Africa as the origin of black people, shifting to the Black Movement and their myth of Africa is a radical change in perspective. It goes to the understanding of self as descendent of passive inferior slaves or the son of proud and potent African kings. It is all about what history you consider yourself to be part of.

4. Slavery or Resistance

As a black Brazilian you are taught that Brazil is a racial democracy and that your ancestors were inferior African slaves, still visible in your skin colour. This is the understanding of race opposed by the Black Movement, but there is one problem. Their focus on the positive myth of Africa leaves out 500 years of slavery in Brazil – if black people indeed are the sons and daughters of potent African kings, then why suffer 500 years of oppression?

This is where the Quilombos and Zumbi dos Palmares become relevant. The Quilombos are run-away slave settlements in the forest where

rebellious Africans created their own society based on West African traditions. In Brazil this took gigantic proportions as the settlements grew to comprise 15 % of the population in the 17th century. The settlements were part of what has been called a republic: The Republic of Palmares. When it was at its biggest Palmares was attacked yearly by the Portuguese colonial Empire and yet it resisted for more than a hundred years. Approaching the end of the 1600's the Portuguese offered freedom for all the former slaves in Palmares if they would move to the coast where they could more easily be controlled. The king Ganga-Zumba agreed although many were against it. This led to the death of Ganga-Zumba and the claiming of power by Zumbi. Legend says that he refused to give up the fight until all slaves in Brazil were set free. Shortly after, the Portuguese succeeded in burning the capital and defeating the Quilombo of Palmares. Zumbi survived and continued to fight the Portuguese with guerrilla warfare until he too were captured and decapitated to encourage future rebels from revolting (Ilé Aiyé pamphlets).

This is a potent history to be part of and Zumbi along with his Quilombo warriors (*quilombolas*) are strong symbols in the Black Movement. Through them the Black Movement gains a powerful and proud ancestry of resistance to supplement the potent African kings. In this history they find a forceful opposition to the docile and passive history of the inferior slaves from the stereotypical Africa. That is why protest marches and drum songs celebrate the immortality of Zumbi, why his statue has been placed at the central square in Salvador and why the location of the last stand of Palmares is being made into a museum and tourist attraction. Many Black Movement militants go there to celebrate the 20th November as Black Consciousness Day (see Burdick, 1998). But they are not the only ones looking for Africa.

5. Roots Tourism

Brazil is not the only country where a part of the population is looking back to find their roots in Africa. The United States have a long tradition among black people of discovering their roots and here the two versions of Africa are made relevant again. Constantly reinforcing the stereotypical Africa in TV and press Black Movement militants from the US look elsewhere for the myth of Africa to empower them and in which they can take pride in their ancestry. Believing with the stereotype that Africa is lost they look to Brazil.

From a distance Brazil is seen to celebrate their racial democracy and thus take pride on the African elements. Together with the

myth of Africa projected by the Black Movement the Roots Tourism is blooming. The militants from North America go to Brazil in search of the harmonious racial relations promised by the idea of racial democracy while looking for the myth of Africa at the heart of Brazil. Racial democracy is founded on the idea of harmonious relations and thus the US militants expect to find the authentic Africa in Brazil as they claim the actual continent has been spoiled. Through a combination of the racial democracy fought by the Black Movement and the myth of Africa intended to empower them by opposing it, it seems Brazil becomes more African than Africa itself.

The central thing is to understand that just as there is a fight for the definition of Brazil, so are there a fight over the definition of Africa in Brazil. At the moment there are two versions. Brazil can either be a racial democracy or characterized by structural racism as argued by the Black Movement. Africa can either be the lost continent of the passive and inferior slaves or the potent land of magic and proud kings. What Brazil you consider yourself to inhabit as a black person has strong implications for what Africa you believe yourself to be a descendent from. The two are closely linked. Thereby Brazil's two Africas are important for the debate over race on Brazil – just as which Africa is found in Brazil.

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